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ABSTRACT

As Martha Nussbaum argues, narratives, and especially novels, provide a way of reflecting on what it means to live well morally, and the emotional responses that stories evoke are crucial to the ability to formulate complex moral judgments. An important aspect of the moral nature of literature is the reader's "empathetic imagination," or the ability to connect to the situation of another, both emotionally and intellectually. In a college course based on the literature of the Vietnam war, the students' responses to the war narratives suggest a relation between emotion and the empathetic imagination. Frequently, students expressed their strongest emotional reactions when they had cause to empathize with characters, as one excerpt from a student paper shows. Another excerpt depicts one student's attempt to confront the specific ethical dilemmas faced by the soldiers, and by so doing to reconsider personal moral beliefs. Students discovered that being a good soldier was not the same as being a good person, so that standards of "good" are largely contextual. For many students, the entire process of closely examining personal beliefs can be scary, as William Perry's model of moral development suggests. One last set of excerpts shows how a student begins to question the cultural narratives that have structured her beliefs. Strong emotional responses to readings about a highly controversial and unpopular war demonstrated the validity of Nussbaum's notion of the interrelatedness of emotion and ethical judgment. (HB)

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Thinking About War:

Empathetic Imagination in the First Year Writing Class

In the fall of 1990, we were associate instructors for a course on the literature of the Vietnam war designed by Barry Kroll. This class of 150 students met twice weekly in lecture, and twice in discussion sections of 25 students each. We read a variety of narratives from different genres, including oral history, fiction, new journalism, and poetry; writing assignments included critical essays, reading journals, and a final reflective essay. By presenting students with a variety of genres and perspectives on the war, we were hoping students would learn that there is not one true story of what Vietnam was or what it meant to people.

A course on war is an intense experience. And the intensity of our class was heightened for a number of reasons: our students were freshmen and sophomores--18, 19 years old--the age of most of the authors when they were in Vietnam. Many were children of Vietnam veterans and had a real stake in trying to understand their parents. And, perhaps most of all, the threat of war in the Gulf was turning into a real possiblity and they, their brothers, friends, and boyfriends were of draft age. Thus, more than in any other class we have taught, students felt an overwhelming urgency to solve the ethical dilemmas they were confronted with and a need to connect "real life" to classroom inquiry.

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In this presentation, we will consider the work of Martha Nussbaum, a professor of philosophy, classics, and comparative literature, as a way of understanding our students' responses to war. We are interested, in particular, in looking at students' reading journals and reflective essays to see how they expressed their empathy for characters and made ethical judgments in relation to these feelings of empathy. In Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature, Nussbaum argues that literature, like moral philosophy, provides a way of reflecting on what it means to live well; yet unlike moral philosophy, which emphasizes abstract reasoning, literature involves the reader in a complex set of emotional as well as intellectual activities.

As teachers we are interested in eliciting and respecting our students' feelings, and recognizing their usefulness in making judgments. But as we try to define the potential of what we are calling the "empathetic imagination"--that is, the ability to connect to the situation of another both emotionally and intellectually--we wonder how classroom empathy translates into the real world. What is the connection between empathy and agency?

* * * * * *

Before we turn to our students' writing, we'd like to present the case Nussbaum makes for the importance of stories and how the emotional responses that stories evoke are crucial to our ability to make careful complex judgments. Narratives--especially novels for Nussbaum--are the most effective form for us to grasp "accurately" complex situations of human life: the detail and

particularity that stories embody help us develop a "fine-tuned awareness" to individual situations. A reader's attention to the particular means that she is less likely to base her judgments on general rules which often reduce or simplify a situation's complexity.

Nussbaum also recuperates the importance of attending to our emotional responses to literature, arguing that emotions are centrally involved in the process of judgment. She says that "because the emotions have [a] cognitive dimension in their very structure, it is very natural to view them as intelligent parts of our ethical agency, responsive to the workings of deliberation and essential to its completion" (41). Emotions are cognitive because they are learned; that is, they are not "natural" or pure. Rather, as Nussbaum argues, we learn our "emotional repertoire" through our family and cultural stories.

We would like to look at some of our students' responses to war narratives to see not only how they expressed emotions, but also the relation between emotion and empathetic imagination. One of the interesting things we noticed in reading students' journals is that students expressed their strongest emotional reactions when they had cause to empathize with characters. After reading novels by James Webb and Tim O'Brien, Joel writes:

> As we kept on reading these books I started dreaming about them. I would dream that I was with Snake and Senator in <u>Fields of Fire</u>, trying to make it through the nightly firefights. I dreamed I was humping through

> through the jungles after Cacciato. I was there with them . . . I really tried putting myself in these men's shoes to better understand their thoughts and feelings . . . I mean, I had nightmares from just imagining how these people would feel. I cannot imagine what kind of torcherous nightmares they would have had . . .

In this excerpt, Joel clearly empathizes on a deep level with the lives of the soldiers. While this excerpt does not include any critical evaluation of the moral situations presented in the novels, his emotional response provides necessary ground for the kinds of ethical and critical reflection we asked of students. His imaginative re-creation of the terror of war in his dreams suggests that he has moved toward what Nussbaum calls a "fine-tuned awareness" of a soldier's predicament. In a way, Joel's response is strong precisely because he suspends judgment about soldiers in general while he empathizes with a particular character; he seems himself "humping through the jungles after Cacciato," the protagonist of O'Brien's novel.

Joel's empathy is valuable because it gives him a personal investment in the story; he has reason to care about a character's moral choices because he has already (literally) put himself in the soldier's shoes. But we don't want students to stop here.

Another student also identifies with the plight of the soldiers, but where Joel empathizes most with the soldiers' feeling of fear, Tara attempts to confront the specific ethical dilemmas they faced and in doing so, reconsiders her own moral beliefs. She

writes:

> We have talked some about whether or not we would have been anti-war protesters . . . I also kinda wonder what kinda soldier I'd be. Would I have stood up against the atrocities? Would I have been a good shot? Would I have submitted myself to drugs? Would I have been respected by my fellow soldiers? Would I have agreed to frag an officer? Would I have kept my sanity?
>
> Sometimes I think I know how I'd react in certain situations, but do I really?. When it actually comes down to it, what would I do? It is scary to think about. I can look at others and understand and sympathize with their experience, but I can't imagine me in it. I guess it is kinda the idea of "it would never happen to me." But they are all MEs . . . I think I know what is right and wrong, but which would I choose once put into the situation? Would I be good?

At this point in the semester, we were considering what it meant, during the Vietnam war, to be a good soldier. The students were considering the dilemma that the qualities required of a good soldier were not necessarily those required of a good person, precisely because of the particular contingencies of war. Standards of "good," we were discovering, can be contextual. Here Tara is struggling with this dilemma by putting herself in the place of a soldier, trying to imagine how she would act and react--from what she can know of herself--in this situation.

What she discovers is that pros and cons, good and bad, cannot simply be added up. Instead, to use Nussbaum's terms, the criteria we use to make ethical choices are noncommensurable; that is, the value of one "good" cannot always be measured in a quantifiable way against another competing good. As we had discussed in class, to "stand up to atrocities" contradicted the imperative that a "good soldier" follow orders; and to "retain one's sanity" might entail actions unthinkable during peacetime.

What is also very significant about Tara's response is that her final question, "am I good?" stems from her recognition that her own moral beliefs might be as shakable as those of the soldiers in the stories. She wants to believe that "it could never happen to me"--that is, that her morals wouldn't be upset by "atrocities"--but she comes to realize that all the soldiers felt this way, that "they were all Me's." The emotion implicit in her journal entry is fear, which comes from the realization that she, too, might not be good. This threatened her deep-seated sense of self. The strong emotion in this response is related to her new recognition that moral value is contingent and her own moral certainties capable of shifting. As Nussbaum argues,

> [there is] not only an intimate connection between emotion and belief but also, in particular, a connection between the emotions and a certain sort of belief, namely, beliefs about what is valuable and important.

In other words, emotions are an index to our beliefs.

But Tara's excerpt suggests something further. That is, that

challenging the deep beliefs revealed through emotional responses calls up a whole different set of emotions; as Tara put it, the whole process of examining beliefs is "scary." As Barry Kroll suggests--following William Perry's study of college students' moral development--this is a precarious moment in students' cognitive development. Shaking the grounds of students' absolutism into relativism typically results in one of two responses: students can either cling even more tenaciously to old beliefs or make a leap into what Kroll calls "critical contextualism," that is, the ability to make decisions and come to provisional commitments based on an awareness of context.

Emotions are critical in this movement towards committed or critical contextualism, for they provide fertile ground for considering cultural as well as personal values. As Nussbaum reminds us, emotions themselves are in large part products of cultural narratives. According to Nussbaum:

> emotions are not feelings that well up in some natural and untutored way from our natural selves; they are, in fact, not personal or natural at all. . . they are, instead, contrivances, social constructs. . . . We learn emotions in the same way that we learn our beliefs--from our society. But emotions, unlike many of our beliefs, are not taught to us directly through propositional claims about the world, either abstract or concrete. They are taught, above all, through stories.

Our goal, then, would be for students to use the emotions elicited

by stories as a tool of perception, not only to find out what they believe, but also to question the social roots of those beliefs.

Another student, Beth, begins to question the cultural narratives--those of Catholicism, patriotism, and family--that have structured her beliefs. In her final, reflective essay, she explains her empathy for a character in Linda VanDevanter's memoir, Home Before Morning by describing her own similar upbringing. She writes:

> I found out a great deal about myself. I saw how much my life is affected by my parents' beliefs and my religion. Most of this I realized while reading Lynda Van Devanter's novel (sic) because I saw a lot of her in me. The major connection between us is our strong belief in Catholicism. Van Devanter wanted to be a martyr or a saint, and I wanted to be a nun. We both believed that since the United States is the "one nation under God," we should do anything for it. After all, we thought it was divinely guided. I have not lost my faith in my religion. I held on to it as I am sure Van Devanter did; however, I was able to see how it affected my thinking.

Beth is not quite ready to give up her old values, nor was that what we asked of students. She continues to see value in religion, patriotism, family. But she also sees the necessity, at least the possibility, of thinking differently. As she begins to reconsider her values, she wrestles with the contradictions between opposing beliefs. She also begins to understand the ways her own beliefs

are culturally constructed; she is able to see how religion "affected [her] thinking."

But in looking more closely at Beth's essay, we've come to realize that even when students want to consider alternative ways of viewing war's dilemmas, this process involves rethinking other cultural stories intrinsic to their self-definition. Beth continues:

> Another similarity between [me and Van Devanter] is found in our fathers. Her father obviously loved his country because he was upset at being denied the chnce to fight for it in the military. He instilled his love for the United States in his daughter in the same way my father did in me. I clearly remember my father telling me, "Do you have any idea how lucky we were to have been born in the U.S.? Look around in the other countries of the world and see how so many of the people suffer." I am not saying that I disagree with my father. I still love my country and would not want to live anywhere else; however, through reading Van Devanter, I see how his beliefs influenced me.

Beth's beliefs about her country are inextricably linked to the narratives she has inherited from her father, her religion, her nation. Changing her conception of the war is not merely an intellectual exercise, but involves rejecting her father's world view. She is not quite ready to "disagree" with her father; but even imagining holding a different view leads her to understand how

deeply she has been influenced by him. We see this as a valuable step towards recognizing the social context of her belief. From our re-reading of Beth's essay, we realize the tight weave between her love for country, her relationship with her father, and her commitment to her relgion. For most students, the fabric of belief was not going to be re-woven in the course of a semester.

Still, there's potential for change and agency. Beth writes that as a result of this course, and specifically the strong emotions it evoked in her,

> I have a much higher regard for human life, and I would do anything in my power to prevent something like the Vietnam War from happening in the future. In addition to this, I gained a better understanding of myself and why I think the way that I do. These are all valuable lessons and will have a lasting affect on my life.

As teachers, we couldn't predict, nor did we feel we should prescribe, what sort of action students should take in response to war. As we reflect on our role in the institution of education--an institution that too often ends up reproducing culture, including the story of war--we wish we had done more to tease out the cultural and political grounds of students' values and beliefs. But, we didn't have time. This was partly because we wanted students to be able to construct in a thoughtful, responsible way, their own story of Vietnam, and this meant keeping the focus on the war itself. Also, it was all we could do to help students through profound shifts in belief as they confronted--many for the first

time--the possibility of human evil, and, specifically, the atrocities some young Americans, like themselves, were capable of in war. This left little time for analyzing students' writing as a reflection of their own social positions.

But what is heartening is the way emotional and intellectual engagement--what we've called the empathetic imagination--helped our students make sense of a complicated event in history. It gave them a way to connect to, and respect, people whose gender, race, and place in history were different from their own. We are not suggesting that emotional knowing should be privileged over other ways of knowing; yet our experience in this particular course, where strong emotional responses were inevitable, allowed us to see the powerful role emotion plays in coming to ethical judgment. Nussbaum's work offers a starting point for considering how emotion and intellect--usually seen as separate--are integrally, and necessarily, related.

Not all students were able to empathize with the characters they encountered; not all moved from emotional engagement to critical reflection. Yet many students, like Beth, used their emotional responses to the narratives of war to to begin to consider the roots of their beliefs. Understanding the complexities of war--and the complexities of belief--may allow students to think and act something different.